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Improvement areas of leadership training in European institutions of higher education

Olga Delgado *

Ph.D. Professor, Departament de Ciència I Enginyeria Nàutica – Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, Edifici de la Facultat de Nàutica, Pla del Palau, 18, 08003 Barcelona, Spain

Abstract

Leadership is an increasingly ubiquitous subject in many undergraduate curricula and its teaching is proliferating in most recognized institutions, but there is an alarming lack of scientific basis in many topics taught in these courses. This paper draws on data collected from students that have finished a leadership program and from the analysis of their curricula. A major contribution of this paper is to establish the need for a break for many institutions in Europe, which should rethink their research and teaching programs in order to ensure the quality of their leadership training. © 2013 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

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1. Introduction

In the last years, due to the growing emphasis in business and industry on teams and collaborative practices, there has been a growing call for institutions of higher education to develop leaders. In USA the emergence of new leadership associations, conferences, and resources for leadership educators is working for the quality of leadership training. In Europe we are some steps behind, following American trends and advances, but not developing enough knowledge about leadership, using American models and ignoring that cultural differences play an important role in leadership effectiveness, and sometimes following best-seller books without scientifically validated results, instead of the latest scientific literature with proven correlation to leadership outcomes.

2. Purpose of the study

Scholars agree that leadership can be learned if students are willing to (Daloz, 2005, Doh, 2003, Danzig, 1999) and it is proved that leadership training helps to develop leadership skills (Collins, 2004, Arthur, 2003). This study aims to identify weaknesses of current leadership

* Olga Delgado. Tel.: +351-968718075
E-mail address: odelgado@cen.upc.edu

training programs in Europe in order to increase students' satisfaction and to improve the outcomes of future leadership trainings.

3. Methods

In order to detect improvement areas of Leadership training it was decided to get students feedback. The research literature suggests that student feedback constitutes a major source of evidence for assessing teaching quality and that it can be used to inform attempts to improve teaching quality (Richardson 2005).

The questionnaire consisted of 20 'tick-box' items, of which 3 related to demographics and 17 were Likert items requesting respondents to indicate their level of agreement from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). In addition to the 20 items, there were three open response boxes that allowed students to provide a free form response to three questions asking them what the best and worst aspects of their leadership training were, and what they would most like to change.

Open-ended questionnaires might be particularly appropriate on programmes in education where students are often encouraged to be sceptical about the value of quantitative methods for understanding human experience (Richardson 2005), as in the case of leadership.

The advantages of a free form response are well documented: 1. potential richness of data 2. avoidance of the constraint of pre-specified questions or items 3. data can be grouped inductively. (Yorke & Longden, 2007).

However, it must be borne in mind that the responses are necessarily produced rapidly and probably reflect what was uppermost in the respondent's mind at the time (Eley, 2001).

4. Context

As Burns (1978) noted "leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth" (p.2), however many leadership trainers explain their chosen model like it was the only and unquestionable one. Scholars and practitioners should not limit their students to a simplistic model if they want them to actually understand leadership.

Although no one viewpoint can appreciate the totality of leadership, each contributes a distinct facet of leadership identity. From a phenomenological perspective, each of the many leadership theories currently in existence provides another piece of the puzzle, and there will be as many different descriptions of leadership as there are situations in which it arises (Ladkin, 2010).

Cultural differences strongly influence important ways in which people think about leaders and norms concerning the status, influence, and privileges granted to leaders. For instance, project GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness) identified 35 specific leader characteristics that are viewed as contributors in some cultures and impediments to leader effectiveness in other cultures (House, 2001, Javidan, 2009). However leadership models from abroad are accepted universally and are not adapted to our cultural reality when teaching leadership.

5. Findings and results

In the figure 1 we find the demographic data. 73 students who had attended leadership training's programs answered our questionnaire. They were contacted using social networks.

Table 1. Demographic data

Variable	Value	%
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Age	Under 26	12%
	26-30	22%
	31-35	44%
	36-40	15%
	40+	7%
Working	Yes	44%
	No	56%
Gender	Male	38%
	Female	62%
Institution	Public university	38%
	Private university	56%
	Other	5%
Country	Spain	63%
	Portugal	37%

Most respondents were elder than 30 years-old (66%), slightly more than half were working when coursed the training (56%), most were women (62%), more than half attended a private university, and respondents attended leadership trainings in Spain (63%) and Portugal (37%).

In the figure 2 we find free form responses that where coded and grouped in the topics of the left column, and percentages of responses are in the right column.

The broad picture is of students who in general are satisfied with the quality of the teaching of their programs. They found their learning experience stimulating and the teaching supportive. Students stated that the leadership training helped them to reflect about the phenomenon and to develop their leadership skills.

In terms of improvement areas, many students complained mainly about some needless contents that they considered a waste of time, and about the lack of empirical and scientific approach of some contents that “seem taken from any self-help book”, as some stated.

Analysing the programs of the institutions that the respondents attended, we find some examples of contents with no scientific validity as enneagrams or emotional intelligence.

Enneagrams are used in personality typological studies, and they are only one of numerous types of diagrams that model actual and potential interrelationships based on nine factors, parameters or variables (=FPVs). However, the psychological-sociological discipline has to deal with so many FPVs that the over-simplistic enneagrams and similar conceptual figures do not reveal all possible interconnections. Investigations should go far beyond the simplistic enneagrams (Wolf, 1992).

Emotional intelligence (EI) appears in most of the leadership training programs, however, data showing the EI matters for leadership is nonexistent and studies reveal that EI is irrelevant at top leader levels of organizations (Antonakis, 2009), while general mental ability (or IQ) is the single best predictor of work success, and a very good predictor of leadership, as it is positively correlated to objective measures of leader performance and leader emergence (Antonakis, 2003, 2004). Disappointingly the meta-analytic correlation between the Salovey-Mayer Multifactor Emotional Intelligence Scale and performance outcomes was only .19 (Van Rooy & Viswesvaran, 2004). Agreeability (which includes empathy), as measured by personality tests is unrelated to leadership in business, government or military settings (Judge et al., 2002). The evidence overwhelmingly suggests that individuals who are agreeable or high in affiliation do not make good leaders (probably because they are unable to take a stand on difficulty matters, are submissive, and put individual interests ahead of organizational interests). If empathy is related to EI, as suggested by EI defenders, then here is more evidence that EI does not matter for leadership (Antonakis, 2009).

The trainers' assessment was positive overall, but many students expected their trainers to have a more exemplary behaviour and they complained about them not walking the talk in terms of openness to other opinions, assertiveness and conscientiousness, and some indicated that they

could have done a better job in terms of giving feedback. Students criticized that some trainers did not welcome critics to their explanations and were not open to other points of view.

Students found the training too theoretical, specially those who were already working, and disagree that some theories would apply in specific realities of their real world. It was criticized the use and abuse of stereotypes, people were too much simplified and they believed reality is more complex and complicated than this.

Some students also criticized the fact of including relaxing techniques lessons in their programs, because the context was inappropriate to practice them and they felt ridiculous, so they were not able to relax and they felt that this did not help them in their leadership development, and it was out of place.

Table 2. Coded free form responses

Which have been the best aspects of your leadership training?	
Discovering how to develop leadership skills/ to be a better leader	67%
Reflecting about /understanding leadership phenomenon	52%
Gaining self-confidence	31%
Which have been the worst aspects of your leadership training?	
Some needless contents/ waste of time lessons	56%
Lack of empirical and scientific approach	27%
Too theoretical/ distance from reality	23%
Concepts/ models rigidity/ use of stereotypes	19%
If you could make a significant change to your leadership training, what would you want it to be?	
More openness to discussions	38%
More exemplary behaviour of trainers	27%
Eliminate relaxing techniques lessons	16%

6. Conclusions

Although this study had not a number of participants high enough to extract learnings from quantitative data, it enables us to draw attention to some weaknesses of current leadership training programs (lack of scientific approach of some contents, distance from reality, needing of more discussion, etc.).

Training leadership is a task of great responsibility and students of this discipline are logically demanding. Leadership trainers should provide as much as possible scientifically valid data to their students, and they should be honest enough to place students at the point in which their claims are about scientific discussion and validity. Institutions of higher education should be more demanding with their leadership trainers in order to ensure the required level of quality of its teaching, and overall, they should invest in leadership research, not only to contribute to this discipline's advancements, but to provide their students the more advanced knowledge in this field, while the most adapted to their cultural reality and the specificities of their sectors.

Only Spanish and Portuguese students took part in this study, so its validity for other European countries should be discussed.

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